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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: ISLAMISTS TAKE OFF ON ROYAL AIR MAROC

Classified by Political Counselor Craig Karp for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The newspaper of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) has accused Royal Air Maroc (RAM) of "denying its employees the right to pray" and "forcing pilots to break their fasts." The charges are a disingenuous twist on recent administrative steps by the airline. The charges target a national institution connected to the prestige of the palace and the nation as a whole, and come just a month after the wives of two RAM pilots were accused of raising money for a radical Islamist terror cell. While this particular controversy is unlikely to snowball, it demonstrates the PJD's willingness to aggressively play the Islam card in the political arena as it prepares for the 2007 parliamentary elections. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Al-Tajdid, the Arabic daily mouthpiece of the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD) ran a banner headline in the first week of Ramadan accusing Royal Air Maroc (RAM) of "denying employees the right to pray" and even "forcing pilots to break the fast." The accusations were rooted in a decision of RAM management to close a mosque on the premises of its Casablanca administrative headquarters, and a memorandum circulated by RAM at the start of Ramadan reminding pilots of an earlier fatwa allowing them not to fast while flying.

¶3. (C) A Moroccan with contacts at RAM headquarters told us the mosque had been shut down by management mainly because it had been seen to sap the productivity of staff. RAM staff had reportedly been lingering in the mosque beyond prayer time to listen to sermons and exchange views on spiritual issues, all on "company time."

¶4. (C) The PJD's attack on RAM was striking both because of the explosive (and grossly exaggerated) charges that the employer was denying its staff the right to fulfill their religious obligations, and because of RAM's status as a national (and state owned) symbol of development, prestige, tourism, and links between Morocco and the wider world. The controversy came just over a month after the revelation that the wives of two RAM pilots were allegedly involved in fundraising for the Ansar el-Mehdi terrorist cell. The wives' alleged connections to the terrorists, was shocking to the Moroccan public, both because of their standing as middle class housewives, and because of their links to RAM.

¶5. (C) It is significant that these charges come during Ramadan, a period of heightened religious awareness and sensitivity in Morocco. While the controversy will probably blow over quickly, it demonstrates the PJD's willingness to aggressively play the Islam card in the political arena as it prepares for the 2007 parliamentary elections.

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